

An Immense Hunger, Where are We All Going? Our Visions Into A New Year... Edward Curtin

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"Standing there I wondered how much of what we had felt on the bridge was just hunger. I asked my wife and she said, 'I don't know, Tatie. There are so many sorts of hunger. In the spring there are more. But that's gone now. Memory is hunger.'" - Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast

Now that our revels are ended, the holiday celebrations and feasts, if one had them, just a dream melted into thin air, our hungers perhaps richly satiated temporarily or not, our visions project us into a new year in which we hope to realize in a not insubstantial way the images we see before the canvases of our inner eyes.

What can we do, how create the new when we are such stuff as dreams are made of?

To escape the period that ends every sentence, every year, every life, one only needs winged words to take flight, to shimmer in the ascending iridescent light.

My wanderlust has taken me to scores of countries, I imagine, glimmering destinations that have inflamed me with images of satisfaction, but I have never kept an exact count since numbers bore me and my imagination forbids it.

“To a child who is fond of maps and stamps / The universe is the size of his immense hunger,” wrote Charles Baudelaire in *Le Voyage* in 1859.

When I was young and collected stamps of all the exotic places that I hoped to visit, what did I know of desire? Then it seemed satiable, as when I finished one book after another, and placed them neatly on a shelf, as if to say, now that is done – for now. Now the books are different, so too each piece of edible writing that disappears out the backdoor of my days. Today, those tangible little colored stamps on Air Mail envelopes are rarely seen, and so young potential voyagers usually dream digitally as little is left to their imaginations. Their dreams are mass-produced, but their hunger is real. My hunger is still immense.

But the desire to travel, like all hunger, is only satisfied for a while. It is insatiable once it bites you. Every time you are on your way away, you wonder if this voyage will be the last one where you find what you are looking for, even when you don’t know what that is.

You close your eyes, spin the globe, and place a finger to find where you might vacate the old for the new. You hope to return with photographs and memories, knowing secretly that they fade with your days. Perhaps you think you will be like Odysseus, who at the end of his *Odyssey* has just returned home after twenty years and killed all the suitors who have been hitting on his wife Penelope, but then he shockingly tells her that he must be off again for new wanderings: “Woman, we haven’t reached the end of our trials,” he says, as they then proceed to their great olive tree-trunked bed with its mighty roots. It is a short hot rest before he is off again.

Why? What is his destination? What are ours? Where are we all going?

“One morning we set out, our brains aflame, / Our hearts full of resentment and bitter desires, / And we go, following the rhythm of the wave, / Lulling our infinite on the finite of the seas:”

In 1946 the French poet, Jacques Prévert, asked an analogous question, one that haunts us still, as we contemplate the corpses piling up in Gaza and around the world, victims of ruthless smiling jackals with polished faces. His poem “Song in the Blood” asks,

“There are great puddles of blood on the world/where’s it all going all this spilled blood/is it the earth that drinks it and gets drunk No the earth doesn’t get drunk . . . it turns and all living things set up a howl it doesn’t stop turning/ and the blood doesn’t stop running/ where’s it all going all this spilled blood/murder’s blood . . . war’s blood/misery’s blood”

When I was young and in the early years of my blooming, my blood running down another road, I would watch a television show called “Adventures in Paradise.” I would always watch it alone on a small television set that I had in my bedroom, won, as I recall, by some member of my large family on a TV game show. It starred a handsome actor named

Gardner McKay, who would sail the South Pacific on his schooner Tiki, looking for romance and adventures in every port. My only memory of the shows is of the boat sailing the beautiful and exotic waters, accompanied by stirring music. These images kindled the romantic in me, some hunger that I could not then name. It was pure fantasy, of course, but it took me to places I had never been but thought enticingly fulfilling. Each show was a new stamp in motion, just as were the many movies I would attend by myself during my teen years that took me to Italy, France, Greece, Russia, and so many other places. But my hunger persisted.

Years later I would read an obituary of Gardner McKay in *The New York Times* where I learned that after a three-year run of the show, McKay refused to renew his contract with Twentieth Century Fox nor star in a movie with Marilyn Monroe, despite her personal pleas, because he hated the celebrity game where his photo had appeared on the cover of Life magazine as “a new Apollo.” He left for the Amazon rainforest where for two years he worked as an agronomist’s assistant, before moving to France and then Egypt, eventually settling back in the U.S.A. with his wife, where he became a writer. He was a Baudelaire who didn’t self-destruct.

“But the true voyagers are only those who leave / Just to be leaving; hearts light, like balloons, / They never turn aside from their fatality / And without knowing why they always say: ‘Let’s go!’”

In a fascinating essay, “On Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema*,” written in 2012 and included in his new book, *Tricks of the Light: Essays on Art and Spectacle*, Jonathan Crary notes that Jean-Luc Godard, the French-Swiss filmmaker who died in 2022, maintained that Baudelaire’s poem, *Le Voyage*, anticipated cinema and its effects.

“Its general evocation of the boredom and bitterness of experience in a flattened, disenchanted world,” writes Crary, “describes the conditions for new kinds of journeys or dislocations that can occur without movement in space, in its figuration of an apparitional screen on which images and memories are projected.”

Connecting the political history of the period from 1859 to today, it is necessary, maintains Crary, to view it as inseparable from “the intertwined history of the camera arts.” This analysis, which I think is very accurate, is not a call to despair; it is rather the opposite: “. . . Godard implies that each generation must wage its own battle against historical amnesia from the lived conditions of its unique historical vantage point, and that this struggle necessitates the remaking of the techniques and language available to it.”

Here we are today saturated with images, moving and still, a world where digital media, photographs and film in all their manifestations dominate most people’s consciousnesses. But the paradoxical mystery of this development, as Crary notes, is revealed in Godard’s film, *Histoire(s) du cinema*, wherein Baudelaire’s poem *Le Voyage* is continuously recited. As the film travels along, the poet’s words about the disillusionment of actual voyages is recited contrapuntally, as if to suggest that the most ancient of human arts – the poetic voice (“Sing in me, O Muse, and through me tell the story . . . of that man . . . the wanderer”) – remains fundamental, even as technology develops new methods of image making and people travel through film.

One doesn’t have to share Godard’s view that Baudelaire’s poem was prophetically describing cinema to appreciate the rich possibilities of such a meditation at a time when

the world seems entrenched in a media system that manipulates people's minds in all directions simultaneously, carrying both meaning and its countermeaning, resulting in minds stuck at anchor, caught neurotically in dazed stasis.

"Godard's larger suggestion here," writes Crary, "is that the material basis for cinema, including projection, owes as much to the imaginative labor of poets and writers such as Baudelaire, Hugo, Zola, and Charles Cros as it does to any nineteenth-century traditions of applied science or mechanical bricolage."

To escape the period that ends every sentence, every year, every life, one only needs winged words to take flight, to shimmer in the ascending iridescent light.

"We wish to voyage without steam and without sails! / To brighten the ennui of our prisons, / Make your memories, framed in their horizons, / Pass across our minds stretched like canvasses."

So I sit here in a quiet room, not moving, yet moving still, traveling in words to an undiscovered country that I can't see but hope will satisfy my immense hunger. We all have our ways but have a singular destiny. "And being nowhere can be anywhere," as Baudelaire said, just as being somewhere can be everywhere.

"Must one depart? Remain? If you can stay, remain; / Leave, if you must. One runs, another hides / To elude the vigilant, fatal enemy,. / Time! There are, alas! those who rove without respite,"



So let Ernest Hemingway, who had one of his heroes, Jake Barnes, say nearly a hundred years ago, "Cheer up, all the countries look just like the moving pictures," have the penultimate words, again from *A Moveable Feast*:

It was a wonderful meal at Michaud's after we got in; but when we had finished and there was no question of hunger any more the feeling that had been like hunger when we were on the bridge was still there when we caught the bus home. It was there when we came in the room and after we had gone to bed and made love in the dark, it was there. When I woke with the windows open and the moonlight on the roofs of the tall houses, it was there. I put my face away from the moonlight into the shadow but I could not sleep and lay awake thinking about it. We had both wakened twice in the night and my wife slept sweetly now with the moonlight on her face. I had to try to think it out and I was too stupid.

That makes two of us.

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